



Australian Youth Affairs Coalition Survey Results:

“Disability and Education”

August 2011

“There is no way I can achieve the same things in 12 weeks as a student without disability. In an ideal world I shouldn't have to. In an ideal world I shouldn't have to twist myself to fit the system, the system should fit me and what I can do and how long it takes me to do things. I am a highly intelligent and motivated young person. I produce high quality work. It just takes me longer. I am disabled. Not dead. Not stupid. Just different.”

– Survey respondent

Recommendations

The Australian Youth Affairs Coalition (AYAC) believes that young people with disability need to be recognised as a key stakeholder group within the education system. The federal government has an opportunity to be a leader in engaging in genuine consultation when it comes to changing funding policies for students with disabilities.

AYAC urges the federal government to empower and support all young people - regardless of ability or disability - to access training and education, and we offer some recommendations to ensure this can happen.

We recognise that state and territory government and non-government education authorities are responsible for the allocation of funds to individual schools. As such, AYAC recommends that the federal government take the lead in discussions with state/territory education ministries and departments, highlighting and championing the needs and views of young people with disability.

As such, AYAC recommends that the government promote the following initiatives in any relevant discussions:

1. Mandatory disability awareness training for educators working at all campuses to educate teachers and support staff about their obligations under the Disability Standards for Education, about disability assistance measures, and about harassment/victimisation of people with disabilities;
2. The creation of a national youth disability advocacy service to ensure that students who are discriminated against on the basis of their disability have the support they need to negotiate with teachers and support staff to resolve issues, negotiate reasonable adjustments and navigate complains procedures;
3. An independent and comprehensive compliance audit of all education to ensure that there is real accountability of education providers under the Disability Standards for Education;
4. Dedicated regional disability officers under relevant education departments to facilitate the coordination of disability services for students, and ensure the provision of information and advice to students with disabilities;
5. Greater funding for teacher's aides and participation assistants;
6. Expanded eligibility criteria for educational support to encompass a broader range of intellectual disabilities and complex needs.

Introduction

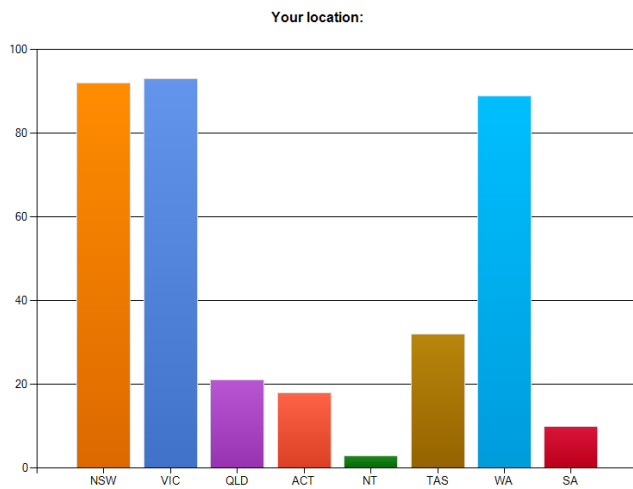
In July 2011, AYAC consulted directly with young people, their parents, and people who work with young people with disabilities via an online survey entitled *Disability and Education Follow Up Survey*. The national poll surveyed 362 people, giving a snapshot of the experience of young people with disabilities in the education system, and yields important insights on what young people themselves believe is most needed.

In May 2011, the federal government announced \$200 million extra funding for school students with disabilities. There are currently more than 164,000 students with disabilities in Australian primary and high schools, and many more in higher education and technical colleges. The policy aims to provide more services, equipment, in-class support and adapted curricula for students, as well as improved support for teachers.

The AYAC poll investigated what else needs to be done for young people with disabilities to receive the education they are entitled to. AYAC surveyed the people most affected on how students with disabilities can be better supported by decision-makers.

“Education should be accessible to all. People with a disability should have the support and technology required for them to participate in education just like everyone else.”

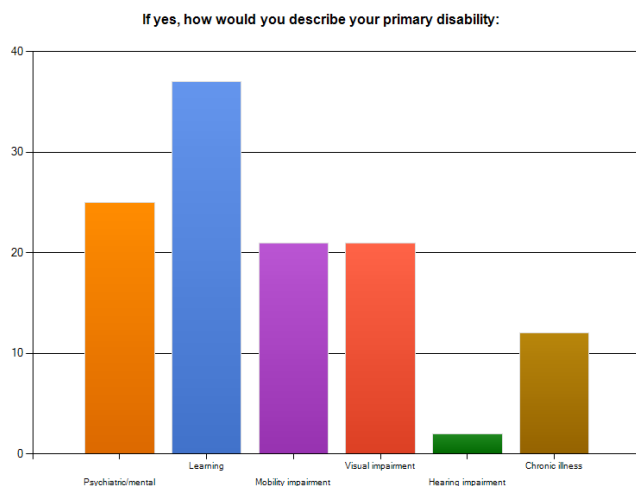
- Survey respondent



The views of people living in every state and territory across Australia were reflected in the results, with young people 16-26 years of age making up 30% of respondents.

Other responses came from parents of students, graduates, educators, community workers and almost 40% of respondents had personally experienced disability.

Biographical data



Nearly 40% of respondents to our survey reported having a disability. The majority of those (31%) reported having a learning disability, followed by 21% with a psychiatric/mental disability. 17% of disabled respondents said they had a visual impairment, and 17% had a hearing impairment with 10% reporting a chronic illness.

“Autism is something that people don't understand. I have high functioning Autism and people think that means I am just like other kids. I am different in a lot of ways. I am home-schooled now and I feel a lot better about my life.”

- Survey respondent

“Teachers teased my primary aged child because he has Tourette Syndrome.”

- Survey respondent

These findings demonstrate the wide variety of disabilities that young people in the education system are facing and reveal the complexity of assistance and support needed by these students.

Prior experiences with educational providers

“Our mainstream public education system is an absolute joke when it comes to my children's special needs. They are very intelligent children but cannot get the support they require to get an adequate education in this country!”

- Survey respondent

The AYAC survey asked current and former students to rate how their school, college or university had dealt with the specific needs of students with disabilities. Of those, 52% of students said that staff did not understand their needs, 62% said that staff awareness of disability was poor, and 54% said that they had moved schools specifically to access better disability support.

“Unless disability standards are mandated, some teaching staff will continue to flout the rules. Some teachers are dedicated and helpful, others are not. It is not fair that parents have to play Russian roulette with their child's education in NSW Government schools. The teachers are like a box of chocolates - you just don't know what you're going to get. And if the teacher isn't very good, life becomes exceptionally difficult for the whole family.”

-Survey respondent

Worryingly, 50% found that lessons were not accessible to them, 56% said that they did not receive enough support for their personal needs, and 50% said that support provided by their school was not sufficient to enable them to continue with their studies. Despite the fact that educational providers are required to make reasonable adjustments to help students with disabilities access the education they are entitled to, this research shows that students are not receiving the support they need.

“There is a big inconsistency of disability awareness across the teacher network. I have had two teachers in 12 months and one was very aware, the other was completely unaware of their obligations or where to get further assistance once I made my needs known.”

- Survey respondent

When asked about the kinds of difficulties they had experienced at their educational institution, the biggest obstacles facing young people were the levels of support and adjustments provided by schools (76%), exclusions from learning activities (45%), missing class time due to their disability (38%), and harassment and bullying (37%).

"I only tell teachers about my son on a 'need to know basis' as the confidentiality of the school has been broken before."

- Survey respondent

When it came to making a complaint, 57% of students said that the complaints process at their school was unsatisfactory. The top three reasons given were: not believing that their complaint would be resolved (58%); feeling unsupported by staff and teachers to talk about their disability and what needs they had (54%); and fearing further victimisation once they made a complaint (50%).

"The complaint process took 7 years."

– Survey respondent

"My child was physically assaulted by a teacher, who remained employed at the school. We have daily issues with our school, never resolved by DET NSW. It is a nightmare."

-Survey respondent

Even though students with disabilities have the right to receive an education, without an effective mechanism to enforce those rights through an adequate and accessible compliance process, those rights cannot be claimed by the young people who are discriminated against due to their disability.

Improvements to disability support in educational institutions

The AYAC poll also asked people to state what services they thought most urgently required *greater funding*. The top three responses:

- 1) Better student support services delivered on campus
- 2) Awareness training for staff and teachers
- 3) Financial aid for students with disabilities

"There is just not enough support in all areas for students with disabilities. The more severe the less support."

- Survey respondent

“We were required to attend school with our son, in order for him to have access to an education. It wasn't until we lodged a complaint with the Human Rights Commission, that the Education Department finally took on the role of sourcing adequate support to enable him to attend school without us. The time and energy we have had to put toward this outcome is mind blowing. What happened to equal rights and the right for every child to have access to an education? I just wish they understood that every letter, phone call, email and meeting that we have to attend to, takes valuable time away from our children.”

- Survey respondent

When asked what *specific services* would make the biggest difference in students' ability to access education the top four responses were:

- 1) Accessible learning material (40%)
- 2) Teacher's aides or participation assistants (37%)
- 3) Expanded eligibility criteria for educational support (30%)
- 4) Adapted evaluation and examination methods (27%)

“We have a daughter in a "special school" here we see a very inclusive side to what goes on, the social stigma that blights the name of these schools does little to show the in many cases fantastic work they do, admittedly we would like to see better therapy options included into the schools, with teachers getting real help rather than having to rely on the goodwill of aids, and therapists being seen infrequently if ever.”

- Survey respondent

When asked what were the *main ways that education providers could improve* how they deal with students with disabilities, the top four responses said that decision-makers needed to focus on:

- 1) Educating staff about the needs of students with disabilities (76%)
- 2) Making support services compulsory for education providers (40%)
- 3) Improving communication between support services and teachers (34%)
- 4) Having staff at schools and universities dedicated to providing disability support (33%)

“Education is the key. Not only for the disabled student but for those in charge. I have recently had to change schools for my teenage son because of lack of understanding for his disability. So now being disadvantaged again with having to pay extra school fees, uniforms and leaving behind a good network of friends. If only his educators were educated in the subject of understanding their disabled students needs...”

- Survey respondent

Conclusions

Overall, AYAC's survey reveals that much greater support is urgently needed for students with disabilities across the whole Australian education system. The vast number of respondents wanted greater education for staff and teachers and more dedicated in-class and in-school support for students. "Poor communication" between teachers and students was cited as one of the biggest issues regarding the provision of support, suggesting that even though the Government has sought to apply the Disability Standards for Education across Australia, that institutions charged with implementing these standards are either ignorant of their obligations, resistant to implementing recommendations from outside disability services, or are simply struggling with the burden of assisting students with greater needs.

More funding for training and a concerted effort to introduce adequate and dedicated disability services in each school, college and university were widely called for by respondents. Where there are educational institutions that actually employ disability officers, it was found that these staff are required to service too many students with not enough time to ensure adequate assistance.

The survey also highlighted that students with Autism and intellectual disabilities were penalised as state education departments often did not recognise these kinds of disability and provide sufficient support for sufferers. The survey revealed that many students need the eligibility criteria for educational support expanded to genuinely reflect the disabilities they suffer from.

There was also a strong call for more support in helping students advocate for themselves and work with teachers and support staff. Many respondents complained of lengthy complaints processes and disappointment with the resolution of their claims.

Students reported that they wanted more flexible options for learning and assessment, including without which they were most likely to drop out of study altogether. Also, increased financial aid to fund tutoring/home-schooling, teacher aides, personal care, and special therapies was a common theme. Trying to educate school age students with disabilities creates a great deal of financial stress for their families and many students with disabilities fall through the cracks at college or university if they can't study full-time and do not qualify for disability pension.

"Education is a right that everyone deserves - it's too bad that more effort isn't put into making it as accessible as possible."

- Survey respondent

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